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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature examines the balancing of social and academic needs of students with disabilities and typical students in the context of the trend toward integrating all students into general classrooms regardless of their learning, physical, or emotional characteristics. Issues in the debate over inclusive education are identified, including dissatisfaction with the ideology of equal but separate education, the isolation of students with disabilities in special education programs, special education's failure to show overall positive outcomes for students, possible reductions in special education funding, and effects of reducing special services to students with special needs. A social perspective on the debate notes difficulties in teaching important social skills in segregated settings, negative social effects of biased peer attitudes, and special problems of integrating students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities. An educational perspective suggests that the education of typical children may suffer in an inclusive classroom but also that the use of technology and other innovative techniques can individualize instruction. Educational reformers are urged to recognize the value of the inclusive paradigm while acknowledging that the general classroom may not be the best educational setting for every child. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

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Social and Academic Issues of Inclusive Education

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Abstract

A growing number of school districts are moving in the direction of inclusive education which integrates all students into general classrooms regardless of their learning, physical, or emotional characteristics. The popularity of the issue is an indication of society's dissatisfaction with separate education. The concept of inclusion elicits a diversity of viewpoints which would substantiate the need for further debate.

Research has shown that segregating students has been detrimental to their academic performance and social adjustment. The legitimate social needs and the equally valid academic needs of students must be considered when determining an appropriate education. Advocates of inclusion stress the importance of educating students in an environment that connects them to a broad social perspective. However, in a disruptive classroom the teachable moment may be lost forever and academics are being compromised for the sake of social relationships. Taking an extreme position on the issue of inclusive education may not coincide with the reality of students' needs. What educators must focus on is reforming a system that maximizes student development while preparing them for a diverse and competitive world.

Social and Academic Issues of Inclusive Education
The Debate Continues

In recent years, the trend has been to integrate disabled students into the general education system while eliminating special education in the process. The movement intends to establish inclusive schools which will require the restructuring of service delivery systems for those students with disabilities. The popularity of the inclusion issue indicates an immense dissatisfaction with the ideology of equal, but separate education.

In response to federal law, most states have created a continuum of special class placements. Few school districts consider the general classroom as part of that continuum. For the past 20 years, students have been placed into special education programs according to their specific disability, and school districts receive funding based on the number of students in each program. Haas (1993) reminds us that special education was intended to be a unique type of instruction to aide the student with disabilities at no cost to the parent.

School reformists believe that compliance with the law means that students with disabilities should be placed in the general classroom with supplementary aids

and services if needed (Willis, 1994). Yet, students with disabilities are continually being placed into off-campus buildings or portables, away from the main school building. Schools are a microcosm of society and this isolation sends the message that students with disabilities are not valued members of a diverse community.

School districts tend to focus on what is wrong with students instead of focusing on their strengths and creating a positive environment where they will enjoy success. Special education was supposed to deliver a better quality of life to students with disabilities, instead it has produced a dropout rate twice that of general education, low rates of employment, and high rates of drug addition and criminality (Willis, 1994). Special education may be a dysfunctional bureaucracy that cannot justify its own undesirable outcomes.

Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of teachers (1995) sees the full inclusion movement as an opportunity for school systems to reduce special education spending. Advocates of special education believe that by placing students with severe disabilities into general education classrooms, special students will be deprived of any benefits they now

receive, creating a larger educational injustice. The legitimate social needs and the equally valid academic needs of the child must be considered when determining an appropriate education (Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L., 1995). And so it goes; a continuous debate that seems to stimulate more questions than answers.

Social Perspective

By placing students with disabilities into special education environments, educators eliminate their opportunities for social skill development. Virtually all exceptional students have significant social skill deficiencies. Many students with disabilities are often isolated within their own neighborhoods. Friendship is an integral part of a child's well being. Schools are the place where friendships begin and sometimes last a lifetime.

In our efforts to comply with the least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate of P.L. 94-142, we have socially segregated students. According to Wang, Reynolds and Walberg (1995) the diverse population in our schools is increasing in equal proportions to the growing alienation, segregation, and rejection that students with disabilities are experiencing. Being in the same class everyday with the same peers since the primary grades has proven to

be counterproductive for students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities, as they reinforce each other's inappropriate behaviors.

A principle goal of education is to prepare all students to be peaceable, moral, and productive members of our community. Educators must realize that separate education will not connect students to a broad social perspective. Many students of various exceptionalities are socially disadvantaged because of negative and biased peer attitudes that comes with labeling. If we are what we perceive ourselves to be, and if labeling implies defectiveness, then perhaps proponents of separate education need to assess the ramifications of this negative stereotyping. It is very important for children to have the opportunity to develop in an environment that represents the world they will eventually live in as adults.

Barry (1995) insists that students with behavioral disabilities need to have more acceptable behaviors modeled on a regular basis. However, research has shown that students who are abusive and disturbing, tend to be rejected by their peers which may cause the disruptive student additional emotional setbacks. Students with emotional problems are prone to behavioral disruptions with physically damaging

repercussions. Smelter, Rasch, and Yudewitz (1994) believe that inclusion will be viewed as irresponsible by the parents of a student who is attacked by an aggressive peer.

Deciding how to serve students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities poses a challenge for the inclusive schools. The teachable moment may be lost forever in a chaotic atmosphere where good behavior may not be contagious. Many students with severe behavior and emotional disabilities may need a therapeutic environment to bring their aggressive and violent behaviors under control.

General classroom teachers may not be given enough support to cope with the diversity of students which may result in a disastrous situation for teachers and students (Willis, 1994). Sapon-Shevin (1995) insists that children are often removed from general education when they challenge the system, thus allowing the system to remain unchanged. However, trying to force everyone into inclusion is just as coercive as forcing everyone into a special class.

Educational Perspective

Many opponents of the inclusionary process maintain that the primary purpose of education is to educate. When children with severe behavioral and

emotional disabilities begin hitting peers and constantly disrupting the class, the education in that classroom is being compromised for the sake of social relationships. Smelter et al. (1994) assert that placing a higher priority on social relationships would be a violation of what society expects us to do with its tax dollars.

The greatest amount of opposition to inclusion seems to come from parents of "normal" children who believe their child's education would be halted as teachers devoted all their time to students with disabilities (Shanker, 1995). Many inclusion advocates emphasize that higher expectations prevail in general classrooms; therefore, more learning takes place (Willis, 1994). If we expect students with special needs to develop effective verbal and written communication skills, we need to immerse them in rich language environments (Davern & Schnorr, 1991). Curriculum goals and instructional techniques will need to be modified to ensure academic success by all students in the inclusive classroom.

According to Rogers (1993), the teacher's job in the inclusive classroom is to arrange instruction to benefit all students even though the benefits may be different. For example, most of the students in a math

class may be computing the total number of degrees in various triangles, whereas, the included student in the same class may be learning to identify types of triangles. Innovative teachers manage to enculturate an academic atmosphere that allows the inclusive student to accomplish as many goals as their general education peers.

Technology is synonymous with inclusive education. Technology is a tool which will support learning in inclusive classrooms by making it active, functional, and connects students to the real world. Computer research reveals that students: (a) increase time on task, (b) decrease problem behaviors, (c) increase daily attendance, and (d) improve the quality of academic assignments. Teachers can collaboratively create curricula that integrate engaged learning with the latest technological developments.

School work should ultimately effect students' lives and futures. Inclusive classrooms complete assignments that examine and solve current problems. Computers can help students gather information on any topic, then students can analyze the information, and reach their own conclusions. A curriculum that is based on social and academic logic will be reinforcing for all students.

Schools who presently practice heterogeneous grouping, peer tutoring, multi-age classes, cooperative learning, and media center learning are engaging in diversified educational practices. Each of these innovations have been successfully demonstrated in numerous studies. Research suggests that schools engaging in these practices will most readily accept the concept of inclusion. Teachers who embrace these educational practices have the capacity to meet the individual needs of all students.

Educational Reform

When the principle philosophy of educational reform reflects the strengths of its students, education will become meaningful and appropriate for all students. In order to bring reform into fruition, the educational paradigm must shift from a separate to an inclusive system for all students. Barry (1995) cautions that inclusion must be introduced slowly to avoid frustration and failure.

Evidence from the last 20 years has shown that segregating students has been detrimental to their academic performance and social adjustment. Baker, Wang, and Walberg (1995) agree that research has demonstrated a small beneficial effect of inclusive education on the academic and social outcomes of

children with special needs. Shanker (1995) argues that in many situations inclusion shows disappointing results for many students -- academically and socially.

Proponents of inclusion argue that strategies such as multi-level instruction, learning centers, and cooperative learning can accommodate all students. For inclusion to be successful, the discussion should focus on the documentation, refinement, and dissemination of instructional, organizational, and technological innovations. Bradley and Fisher (1995) maintain that successful inclusive schools develop interdependent classroom communities which encourage positive educational and social growth by capitalizing on the strengths of its members.

Inclusive education may be a concept realized by the year 2000 if educators believe that separate education violates students' rights, compromises values, and impedes student development.

Unfortunately, educators are being pulled in one direction by their values and aspirations, and in the opposite direction by pressing realities. When it comes to student's lives, educators cannot afford mistakes, therefore, inclusionary practices must proceed with caution.

While the general classroom may not be the best learning environment for every child with a disability, it is highly desirable for all who can benefit. It provides contact with age appropriate peers and prepares all students for the diversity of the world beyond the classroom. Future discussion should focus on a philosophy dedicated to the realization of an educational reform that will deliver opportunities for optimum social and academic development to all students in all schools.

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